The psychological question posed in this thesis is how do people move from being smokers with little interest in quitting, to exsmokers quitting for some time. Evaluation of a popular and influential health behaviour change model, the Transtheoretical Model (TTM), is used to examine this issue. Central to the TTM is the notion that individuals progress through a series of motivational stages of change in attempting to modify behaviour. These stages (and their definitions for smoking cessation) are precontemplation (not seriously considering quitting in the next 6 months), contemplation (seriously considering quitting in the next 6 months, or planning to quit in the next 30 days but has not made a quit attempt in the last year), preparation (planning to quit in the next 30 days, and has made a quit attempt in the last year), action (quit for at least 24 hours), and maintenance (quit for more than 6 months). Other model constructs including ten processes of change (which consist of five experiential and five behavioural strategies for change), the pros and cons of smoking, temptations to smoke and confidence to resist temptations are purported to predict transitions between the stages of change. Prospective tests of stage transitions provide better identification of the factors that cause people to move from one stage to the next, and can inform the debate as to whether behaviour change is better conceptualised as a stage or a continuum process.

There have been few prospective tests of stage transitions. This thesis aims to critically examine stage transitions, with a focus on transitions to and from the action stage of change. Four empirical papers are presented which stem from two independent studies of callers to a quitline. Three papers tested stage transitions. The findings demonstrated little support for the TTM’s few clearly specified predictions regarding stage transitions and question the adequacy of the stage definitions themselves. Different factors predicted progression at different stages thereby supporting the notion of stages, or at least nonlinearities in the change process. The fourth paper highlights an important methodological issue in the testing of stage models, specifically the need to control for stage of change when examining whether the change processes predict cessation. Together, the findings raise concerns about the internal validity and predictive utility of the TTM, and thus its appropriateness as a framework on which to develop smoking cessation interventions.

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